

## Child Sex Tourism

<http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/ceos/sextour.html>

*"On this trip, I've had sex with a 14 year-old girl in Mexico and a 15 year-old in Colombia. I'm helping them financially. If they don't have sex with me, they may not have enough food. If someone has a problem with me doing this, let UNICEF feed them."*

-Retired U.S. Schoolteacher

*"Maria is . . . prostituted by her aunt. Maria is obliged to sell her body exclusively to foreign tourists in Costa Rica, she only works mornings as she has to attend school in the afternoon. Maria is in fifth grade."*

The international tourism industry is booming. Since the 1960's, international travel has increased seven-fold. As tourists eagerly travel to distant lands to enjoy new landscapes and cultures, economically developing countries have welcomed the expansion of the international tourism industry as a much-needed source of income within their own nations. With the exponential rise in this industry, however, comes the growth of a darker, more clandestine phenomenon: child sex tourism.

### Background

Sex tourism is a very lucrative industry that spans the globe. In 1998, the International Labour Organization reported its calculations that 2-14% of the gross domestic product of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand derives from sex tourism. In addition, while Asian countries, including Thailand, India, and the Philippines, have long been prime destinations for child-sex tourists, in recent years, tourists have increasingly traveled to Mexico and Central America for their sexual exploits as well.

Child sex tourists are individuals that travel to foreign countries to engage in sexual activity with children. The non-profit organization End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, and the Trafficking of Children (ECPAT) estimates that more than one million children worldwide are drawn into the sex trade each year.

### Factors Supporting the Child Sex Trade

The most significant societal factor that pushes children into prostitution is poverty. Many nations with thriving sex tourism industries are nations that suffer from widespread poverty resulting from turbulent politics and unstable economies. Poverty often correlates with illiteracy, limited employment opportunities, and bleak financial circumstances for families. Children in these families become easy targets for procurement agents in search of young children. They are lured away from broken homes by "recruiters" who promise them jobs in a city and then force the children into prostitution. Some poor families themselves prostitute their children or sell their children into the sex trade to obtain desperately needed money. Gender discrimination also works in tandem with poverty; in many countries, female children have fewer educational opportunities or prospects for substantial employment. Consequently, they must find other means of earning a living.

The Internet has also facilitated the recent rise in child sex tourism by providing a convenient marketing channel. Websites provide potential child sex tourists with pornographic accounts written by other child sex tourists. These websites detail sexual exploits with children and supply information on sex establishments and prices in various destinations, including information on how to specifically procure child prostitutes. Additionally, sex tour travel agents may publish brochures and guides on the Internet that cater to child sex tourists. In 1995, there were over twenty-five businesses in the United States that offered and arranged sex tours. One particular website promised nights of sex "with two young Thai girls for the price of a tank of gas." The easy availability of this information on the Internet generates interest in child sex tourism and facilitates child sex abusers in making their travel plans.

Finally, actions by foreign governments may directly or indirectly encourage child sex tourism. National

governments in countries which are struggling economically have become increasingly tourist-oriented in their search for profitable sources of income. These governments sometimes turn a blind eye to the sex tourism industry, thus allowing the industry to perpetuate sexual exploitation upon children in order to encourage tourism in their country in general.

### **Victims of Child Sex Tourism**

Child sex tourism makes its profits from the exploitation of child prostitutes in developing countries. Many children are trafficked into the sex trade. In Thailand, for example, Burmese girls as young as thirteen are illegally trafficked across the border by recruiters and sold to brothel owners.

The lives of child prostitutes are almost too appalling to confront. Studies indicate that child prostitutes serve between two and thirty clients per week, leading to a shocking estimated base of anywhere between 100 to 1500 clients per year, per child. Younger children, many below the age of 10, have been increasingly drawn into serving tourists.

Child prostitutes live in constant fear; they live in fear of sadistic acts by clients, fear of being beaten by pimps who control the sex trade, and fear of being apprehended by the police. It comes as no surprise that victims often suffer from depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of hopelessness.

Many victims of child sexual exploitation also suffer from physical ailments, including tuberculosis, exhaustion, infections, and physical injuries resulting from violence inflicted upon them. Venereal diseases run rampant among these children and they rarely receive medical treatment until they are seriously or terminally ill. Living conditions are poor and meals are inadequate and irregular. Many children that fail to earn enough money are punished severely, often through beatings and starvation. Sadly, drug use and suicide are all too common for victims of child sexual exploitation.

### **Child Sex Tourists**

Child sex tourists are typically males and come from all income brackets. Perpetrators usually hail from nations in Western European nations and North America.

While some tourists are pedophiles that preferentially seek out children for sexual relationships, many child sex tourists are "situational abusers." These are individuals who do not consistently seek out children as sexual partners, but who do occasionally engage in sexual acts with children when the opportunity presents itself.

The distorted and disheartening rationales for child sex tourism are numerous. Some perpetrators rationalize their sexual encounters with children with the idea that they are helping the children financially better themselves and their families. Paying a child for his or her services allows a tourist to avoid guilt by convincing himself he is helping the child and the child's family to escape economic hardship. Others try to justify their behavior by believing that children in foreign countries are less "sexually inhibited" and by believing their destination country does not have the same social taboos against having sex with children. Still other perpetrators are drawn towards child sex while abroad because they enjoy the anonymity that comes with being in a foreign land. This anonymity provides the child sex tourist with freedom from the moral restraints that govern behavior in his home country. Consequently, some tourists feel that they can discard their moral values when traveling and avoid accountability for their behavior and its consequences. Finally, some sex tourists are fueled by racism and view the welfare of children of third world countries as unimportant.

### **International Response to Child Sex Tourism**

The response of destination countries to the epidemic of child sex tourism has been ineffective. Although many of these countries have passed legislation that criminalizes sexual exploitation of children, these laws often remain unenforced against tourists. Efforts to combat child sexual exploitation often run into conflict with foreign governments' efforts to promote the international tourism industry. Police corruption is

common. In Thailand and the Philippines, police have been known to guard brothels and even procure children for prostitution. Some police in destination countries directly exploit children themselves. Thus far, the international community has not been able to rely on destination countries to adequately protect the rights and well-being of child victims.

The United States has risen to take legislative action against the growing evils of child sex tourism. In 1994, Congress established 18 U.S.C. § 2423(b), which is aimed towards prosecution of child sex tourists. Section 2423(b) criminalizes traveling abroad for the purpose of engaging in illegal sexual activity with a minor. Currently, successful prosecution under § 2423(b) requires the government to prove that an alleged child sex tourist from the United States formed the intent to engage in sexual activity with a child prior to meeting the child and initiating sexual contact. In other words, a defendant is only punishable under § 2423(b) if he has the intent, while traveling, to engage in sexual activity with minors. The federal government has successfully utilized § 2423(b) to target several child sex tourists. Current proposals to eliminate the intent requirement may broaden the government's prosecutorial power by allowing the government to prosecute United States citizens who engage in sexual acts with children while abroad, regardless of when they formed the intent to do so.

Child sex tourism grows at an alarming rate and inflicts devastating consequences on millions of children around the globe. As a global leader, the United States is committed to using its power to reform and eradicate child sex tourism industry.

-Sowmia Nair